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UNCLAS HO CHI MINH CITY 000789

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV and DRL

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM SOCI PGOV SCUL PREL KIRF VM RELFREE HUMANR

SUBJECT: WELL KNOWN MENNONITE PASTOR DETAINED IN HCMC

REF: A) HCMC 0232 B) 03 HCMC 0766 C) 03 HCMC 0933 D) 03 HCMC

1215

E) 03 HCMC 1222

¶1. (SBU) On the evening of June 8, ConGen HCMC received information from several reliable Protestant contacts that police in HCMC had "arrested" Mennonite Pastor Nguyen Hong Quang at his home in District 2. This followed earlier reports that police were searching the home, which doubles as an unrecognized house church. One leading HCMC pastor said police had arrived at the home at 1:00 p.m., under the pretext of performing some sort of property survey. When Pastor Quang joined them outside, he was quickly arrested and transferred to the District 2 police station. The police returned an hour later to search Pastor Quang's entire home, including his upstairs office. They also searched the house next door, where Pastor Quang maintained office space for his unofficial Boy Scout operations. Family and church members inside the home witnessed the arrest and subsequent searches. They also witnessed the police removing many documents from the two premises, although they were not allowed to accompany police during the search of the upstairs office. Police continued the search until approximately 10:30 p.m. that night.

¶2. (SBU) According to one leader of the Vietnam Evangelical Fellowship (VEF - a loose association of nearly 30 different evangelical house church groups to which Pastor Quang belongs), HCMC District 2 police arrested the Mennonite leader at around 4:00 p.m. on June 8. When several VEF members attempted to enter the pastor's house, police blocked their way. Some members of the VEF leadership telephoned their contacts in the HCMC police force to protest the detention and search. (Post Note: The VEF has built a relationship with individual police officers over the past few years. They frequently call these officers for information and/or advice. End note.) One VEF contact said a high-ranking police official had told him that under "orders from the highest authority," Pastor Quang would be brought up on charges for "acting against the government." This VEF pastor speculated that the arrest probably had something to do with the events of March 4 (ref A), when Pastor Quang and his colleagues physically attacked security officials they believed were surveilling his house, and after grappling with them, took their motorcycle. Police eventually detained four individuals in the course of this incident. Police "invited" one of Pastor Quang's assistants, Pastor Nguyen Huu Hien, in for questioning on June 9, presumably on a related matter.

¶3. (SBU) Pastor Quang is a self-described legal expert with plans to establish an underground legal defense training and advocacy center for religious groups. While he was unsuccessful in gaining GVN recognition as the official legal representative of Father Nguyen Van Ly, he somehow managed to talk his way into the trials of the imprisoned Catholic priest's niece and two nephews last year. Pastor Quang has also been a key player in several highly publicized incidents of alleged GVN religious oppression in HCMC over the past year, including the construction of an illegal house church in District 2; the destruction of a small chapel in Can Gio District; the physical altercation between police and Pastor Bui Van Ba at a house church in District 11; and the distribution of religious tracts disguised as sports program schedules for the Southeast Asia Games (SeaGames) in December 2003 (refs B-D). In the aftermath of the SeaGames incident, Pastor Quang organized a sit-in with his followers at the local police station. He and a couple dozen followers remained there until he got a signed contract from the police agreeing to release two other followers from detention in return for Quang calling off his bold sit-in (ref E). He told Post last year that he has established an independent, unregistered Boy Scout organization for Christians only.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: This latest GVN move against a well-known Protestant pastor is extremely unfortunate, though not entirely unexpected. Details are still sketchy, but Pastor Quang has been on the GVN's radar screen for some time. Pastor Quang's tendency to make unsubstantiated claims that do not match what other members of the Protestant community have told us about specific events, and his increasingly strident rhetoric and militant actions have moved some of his VEF colleagues to ask a sympathetic foreign missionary to "counsel" him on self-control. Other Protestant contacts in Vietnam have expressed concern that many of Pastor Quang's activities are more political than religious. In the past, Pastor Quang has told ConGenoffs that the GVN is

reluctant to take him on because they know the U.S. is on his side. He has embroidered an American flag on his shirtsleeves, challenging security forces to "go ahead and hit me there, because if you hit the United States, it will strike back." It is possible that this latest turn of events is based on the results of a lengthy and detailed police investigation into Pastor Quang's activities over the past few years, and the authorities may not be so forgiving this time. Post will continue to follow up.

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